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HOW SHALL WE FURNISH OUR HOUSES?

CURTAINS AND CARPETS.

"THE Dutch have, perhaps, an indeterminate idea that a curtain is not a cabbage. In Spain, they are *all* curtains—a nation of hangmen." This is Poe's dictum, in the essay quoted in our former paper on furniture. His summing up: "The Hottentots and Kickapoos are very well in their way; the Yankees alone are preposterous;" while near enough for his purpose to the truth, does not declare what estimate he had made of the capacity of the Yankees to use drapery.

This capacity, it must be seen, is of the lowest order. There is no part of our house decoration that baffles more completely all efforts to make it seemly than the curtains. It is not strange that it should be so, for Americans have very little use for curtains. One remnant of the old traditions respecting them still lingers, but it is a remnant of tradition only. The last general usefulness of them ceased when French bedsteads came into fashion, and bed-curtains were taken down as things no longer needed.

Bed-curtains seem to have been the first draperies used in private residences; beginning our reckoning with the beginning of modern civilization—they and their like of like use. This use was to protect from the cold and from drafts of air. Castle chambers, in the tenth century, were huge and walled with stone, without glass or other means

of closing the window-openings. Later, they were lined with plaster or with wainscoting of wood, and wooden shutters were hung; and even glass set in sashes was very generally supplied by the beginning of the twelfth century. However they might be finished and fitted up, there were currents of air, and the wind blew in through crevices and down the wide-throated chimneys; and the heavy tapestries and stuffs of woolen and linen, made in the middle ages, were found useful to shut out the weather. There still remain a few specimens of an utensil, once very common, often illustrated and mentioned in manuscripts—a sort of spur or projecting arm of wood close at the side of a window or door. This was to carry a curtain. Sometimes these spurs were hinged; the curtain was to be shut against the wall so as to cover the window, or opened, at pleasure. Sometimes it was stationary; it was desired only to keep the wind from a certain bed or fixed chair. The bedsteads in wealthy houses, huge, richly ornamented, immovable structures, were hung around with curtains of heavy material. And smaller squares and parallelograms of tapestry were at once the "afghans," the carpets, and the screens of the time; for a square bit of stuff could be hung over the high back-rail settle, or spread over the knees, or laid under the feet at pleasure.

It is commonly supposed that the use of carpets is a wholly modern luxury. This, however, is an error, for as early as the thirteenth century we first hear of floor-cloths in England, and their use was then introduced from the continent of Europe. Another error is in quite the opposite direction; it is that "arras," or hangings, were in common use throughout the middle ages. In fact, though, no certain record is found of their use to cover walls of private residences prior to the thirteenth century. The historical facts are nearly these: Rich oriental hangings and European imitations of them were in use in churches as early as the ninth century, but were too costly for ordinary use. When first introduced into domestic life they were used where most needed—at doors and windows; but the beauty of material and pattern, which had made them suitable decorations in the most splendid churches of the time, recommended them also for the walls of the wealthy, and they gradually superseded wainscoting and plaster, and were hung to mask the rough walls from ceiling to floor. It is to be observed, that this means of covering walls was eminently suited to the circumstances of the time when rooms were large and but little encumbered with furniture. Of these hangings the best were wholly embroidered with the needle, and with chronicles of the events of the time or with scenes from romantic fiction. Others were wholly woven, but very rich in design. These hangings, when used for the wall-coverings of a room, hung across the doors, acknowledging the existence of these only by a slit or a partly sewed division between two pieces; and the whole fabric hung from the ceiling or from a moulding at the top of the wall, immovably fixed above. But the windows were curtained separately by pieces of stuff which were sewn to rings sliding upon a rod, so

that the shading curtains might be, at pleasure, easily slid back and the window left unobstructed.

So much of history it is well to know. For it is wise, before inquiring to what uses curtains can be put, to ask to what uses they have been put.

We have little use now for hangings to shut out the wind. Our windows fit tight, and our chimneys are narrow and tortuous, not even rain-drops fall into our coal fires. Even bed-curtains are abolished. Window-curtains remain. Now, for use, we have "roller-shades," which shut out the sun thoroughly and are not at all in the way; and these can be made of material of any color, from translucent white to nearly opaque dark green linen, and can roll from top or bottom of the window. These have their definite purpose, and answer it. Then, to screen from observation from without the interior of the room, by day, in a way somewhat less disagreeable than by using wire-gauze, we have the lace curtains of city drawing-rooms. These are good, and just what is needed; the material is well suited to its purpose, and hangs gracefully. Even the embroidered muslin curtains, which form a cheaper substitute for lace, are unobjectionable. All these should, of course, hang easily and not too full, and should just reach or not reach the floor; the undue length of curtains which lie a foot upon the floor, even when hooked up, as is the fashion at present, is merely fashion and inconvenient display of magnificence. Moreover, we have wooden blinds outside or inside, or both, and these tend to render all window curtains unnecessary, for we know of very pleasant rooms where rich carpets and costly furniture are, which have no curtains and need none. But the curtains and shades we have spoken of are without objection and have their uses.

So much for utility. But, in considering present customs, we find much

that has no view to utility. White muslin curtains are dear to the hearts of ladies, because of their display of clean, fresh, crisp material. As decorated with ribbons or cords, which tie them up or pretend to, and immovably fixed on each side of the window, they are the principal ornament of cottage bedrooms, and are much desired by young ladies for their bowers everywhere, both in city and country. The male critic, however, can hardly regard them with complacency. They obscure the windows, they collect dust, they are dangerous in the evening when lamps are lighted, and burn down nearly all the country houses that are burned; they are much in the way when one would open or shut window or blind; their use has never been discovered, and their beauty is ugliness. The removal of these from a pleasant country room and substitution of white or buff shades on rollers, is the first touch necessary, in most cases, of that manipulation which will make such a room as pretty as it might be. Besides these, there are the heavy curtains of wool or silk, which are in common use, and which seem to be the direct descendants of mediæval arras. These have, indeed, one use—to draw close at night when the fire is bright and the lamps are lighted, and when the winter had better be shut out by heavy folds through which warmth cannot escape nor noise enter. But the common arrangement of these curtains—secured at top behind a gilded "cornice," which is utterly without use or meaning, only to be opened at bottom; kept open there by brass hooks or by cords, in stiffly curving plaits which never change; darkening the room in a way in which a room ought very seldom to be darkened, by shutting out all light except from the bottom of the window;—this whole affair is as bad as it can be, both for looks and for use, and should be speedily

abandoned. They should, of course, be so arranged as to draw easily. A stout metal rod should be secured above the window, and the curtain-rings which slide upon it should be of sufficient size to move easily along it, and should be tolerably close together. Perhaps a thin brass tube an inch in diameter is the best rod, and the rings may be of brass, or perhaps, of *lignum-vitæ*. So arranged, the double curtain can with one twitch be brought close across the window, and can almost as easily be flung back, well behind the window casing.

It often happens that a room is very well without curtains. If they are needed for any purpose, let the material and arrangement be used which will best answer that purpose. Do not suppose that drapery is beautiful and decorative in itself; it is not. It takes its sole value from the use to which it gracefully lends itself. Rich-stuffs, indeed, may be beautiful in themselves, though with us they seldom are; but even if you have twenty yards of a silk brocade of really beautiful design and splendid colors, do not hang it up for a curtain where it is not needed. Better lay it, folded, on the wardrobe shelf until there is need of it, it will have a twofold beauty in its right place.

It will be very well, however, to consult mediæval practice for the possible uses of curtains. It will be found that more use can be made of them than is generally supposed. Consider, for instance, the doors of a house. Many houses are badly planned in one respect, viz.: the doors of chambers are in such places and open in such a way as to show the interior too plainly. Doors, too, are too thin and vibratory; sounds pass through them too easily—conversations are overheard which had better have been kept private. Every doorway in a good house, certainly every chamber doorway, should be fitted with two doors; one opening outwardly, and

one inwardly; or else the door should open outwardly, and a curtain should be hung within, ample enough to cover and fold about both sides of the door casing. In large doorways, as between drawing-room and dining-room, a curtain alone is often the best and most convenient inclosure. In a beautiful library we know of, two beams (or, strictly speaking, girders) cross the ceiling of the room, which is about eighteen feet wide by twenty-four feet long; and underneath one of these beams is a rod from which two curtains are hung with rings. These curtains, when drawn, divide the room into two uneven parts; the fire-place is in the larger part, sixteen by eighteen feet; the only entrance door is in the smaller part. All day the curtains are thrown back, and fall in close folds against the walls, leaving the room unobstructed. At night, when the family or any members of it would be undisturbed to converse or to study, the curtain is drawn; then, if the door open, the person entering is not at once in the room, he is in a vestibule as it were, where his step is heard by the inmates, who need not be taken by surprise.

The decoration or finishing of the whole interior of a room by means of linen or woollen stuff is not unknown in our own time. Boudoirs in Europe, at least, are not uncommonly fitted up with chintz or printed linen, which, however, is generally secured to the wall at intervals, and "tufted," as the upholsterers say. We have seen a lodge-room hung with dark red, and another hung with grey worsted stuff, the hangings in these cases being secured at the top only, gathered so as to hang very full and just touching the floor. Now, none of these are altogether suitable to a drawing-room or library; the first plan is not beautiful, the second is inconvenient where there is much furniture. But there are cases when

some interior wall-covering is wanted, different from those commonly in use.

It is hard, for example, to finish the walls of a room so as to equal in richness of effect the splendid furniture and rich carpets it may contain. Wall-paper is very limited in its application. Painting in polychromy is good; but who is to do the work? Wainscoting in hard wood may be inconvenient and will generally be too costly. Wainscoting in white pine will still require polychromatic painting. Tapestry may well be used if it can be obtained fit for the purpose;* and it always can be from England by any means which involve an opportunity to make proper selection. Now, if the lower part of the wall be wainscoted as high as the backs of the chairs, or, say three feet and six inches above the floor, tapestry may hang from the top of the wall to the top of the wainscot, and be there secured at the lower edge; not, however, as it is at the upper edge, but less often, and not drawn tight. It should merely hang along the wall. At the top it should be secured every inch or two, or, still better, continuously.

One word more, and we are done with hangings and curtains for awhile. If a church or lecture-room is haunted by a disagreeable echo, the covering of its walls with such hangings as we have been describing will lay the ghost. This is not an untried experiment.

* [Happening in, the other day, at Mr. S. P. Avery's pleasant rooms, 694 Broadway, where one is always sure of finding something curious, or rare, or beautiful, perhaps all three—he showed us a piece of Gobelin tapestry, brought by our soldiers from Columbia, S. C., when that place was destroyed by the rebels. We should have said, saved from our soldiers; for, it is one of a set of four pieces, the other three of which, in their ignorance of the difference between Gobelin tapestry and carpet, our men had cut up for saddle-cloths! It is not every day that one has a chance to buy a bit of Gobelin with a story woven into it! Perhaps some one of our readers will take this hint.—Ed. "New Path."]

The essayist of *The Cornhill Magazine*, whose paper we quoted before, after speaking briefly of curtains in a way confirmatory of our convictions on this subject, speaks intelligently of carpets. He says:

"Among the many fashions of the day which tend to unpicturesqueness and expense without any corresponding advantages in point of comfort, is that of cutting out and fitting our carpets so as to exactly follow the plan-outline of the room. Yard upon yard of stuff is wasted in the earnest endeavor to cover up the floor in every recess occasioned by a window or the projection of a chimney breast. Nor is this all, for the carpet thus once laid down will not again fit any other room without a farther sacrifice of material. This inconvenience might easily be avoided by allowing the carpet to assume the form of a simple parallelogram, not extending further in any direction than the inmost projections of the area."

The author goes on to give examples of the better practice he advises; but our own examples will suit our purpose better. Nearly every one has seen, in some city or country house, a room floored with hard wood carefully laid down and smoothly oiled and waxed, the carpet occupying the middle of the room, a plain parallelogram, leaving a margin all around where the floor was visible. We know of houses of very moderate size and of no pretensions to splendor, where the custom is followed. No plan, however, suits so well with a handsome room and rich furniture. The carpet is to be laid down for winter. For the summer the bare floor is better than carpet, straw matting, or linen floor-cloth. The carpet may be secured to wooden pins, projecting from the floor about the thickness of the carpet itself; or it may be so loaded at the edges, or edged with a heavy fringe that it will lie smoothly. Suppose the room to be

sixteen by twenty-two feet in greatest dimension, and the hearth to project two feet into the room. Let the parallelogram of carpet be twelve feet wide and sixteen feet long. Then the chairs and sofas next the wall will stand upon the floor, but the feet of the sitter, who occupies one of them, will rest upon the carpet.

"But," urges a doubter, "the floor will be so expensive!" Not necessarily. Those who will have nothing worse than polished walnut, oak, and maple for their flooring-stuff, would have Saxony or Axminster carpets. Remember that our proposal, if adopted, would save wonderfully in carpets. A very pretty floor may also be made at moderate cost. Every good house has its floors of narrow flooring-planks, not over four inches wide. The best houses have their floor-planks an uniform width of two and a half or of three inches. About New York these flooring-planks are always fitted together with the tongue-and-groove joint, and nailed so that the nail-heads are concealed. In and about Boston they are often laid without the joint, merely nailed down close together, but then the flooring is always double. In either case the alternate planks may be stained a dark color, the whole oiled, waxed, and rubbed, and the floor need shame no one, or contrast unfavorably with a very rich carpet indeed. Many varieties in the flooring are possible. The narrow planks may be cut into short lengths and laid "herring-bone" fashion, zig-zag, or in diagonal squares, as in the entrance-hall of the Academy of Design. Of the luxuries of *parqueterie* and *intarsiatura* we do not treat at present.

When the carpet is treated as described above, it becomes of a somewhat less paramount importance, and governs less absolutely the other decorations and furniture of the room. This is a great gain. For the carpet, though

generally considered "the soul of the apartment," from which "are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all objects incumbent," cannot so control the room without injuring the whole effect. The painting of the ceiling, if it be painted, the painting or papering of the walls, the color of the material that covers important articles of furniture, the table-cloth, the curtains, if there are curtains, are each entitled to a voice in the general effect as potent as that of the carpet. For our own part, that carpet pleases best which is not noticed at all. The color may be warm and rich—mingled colors are the best, but may not be glaring and attractive of notice.

Now hear a word from Mr. William Burges, a first-rate authority: "In all these carpets (some splendid oriental specimens) it will be seen that the border plays a most important part, and probably the last thing that would enter into the head of an oriental would be to cut out a carpet to the shape of the room and then nail it down, so that it should be impossible to clean the floor without the trouble of unnailing it again."* Two points, observe, are stated in this brief abstract. First, that the best designs for carpets are not to be cut into and cut to pieces, but, like good designs of any kind, need every line and hue of the whole, and must be used as they are made. Second, that a carpet should be a convenient thing to take away and clean, and allow the floor to be cleaned. A good friend and most artistic young architect has given his opinion in our hearing, that every carpet

should admit of being rolled up once a week and carried away to be shaken or swept—not beaten with sticks—a hebdomadal cleaning need not be so radical as that. He would abolish brooms altogether, as distributors of dust. The bare floors should be swept, as bare office-floors are, with a long-handled soft brush.

Moreover, as Mr. Burges reminds us, the beautiful carpets of the east were not meant to be trodden on with muddy boots, but are of silk and velvet. Well, when carpets are rightly used, we shall see some arrangement generally adopted such as this: A room need not be limited to one carpet, there may be a splendid eastern floor-cloth, but it will not be laid down when there is danger of injury; another and a less delicate and solemn fabric may be kept for ordinary occasions.

The question of colors and combination, and the question what can be done easily in America, cannot be answered now. Our principal purpose is to ask readers to think for themselves about things concerning which they do not think at all, but follow the upholsterer's instructions. There is one word of advice: Should you find a practical difficulty in the way of any new notion which we or your own thoughts suggest, do not, therefore, reject the notion. Our present system of furnishing and upholstery has had years of attention, rival dealers and manufacturers striving each to surpass the other, each generation simplifying and improving the processes of the last. A carpet which is to be laid down as we have advised may be laid down in many ways. The best way is to be found by experiment.

* "Art Applied to Industry," by William Burges, F. R. I. B. A. London: Parkers, 1866. Page 89.